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A BOOK FOR TODAY

Seeking Vietnam Negotiations

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

THE SECRET SEARCH FOR PEACE IN VIETNAM. By David Kraslow and Stuart H. Loory (Random House, 248 pp., $5.95).

The diplomatic history of the Vietnam war promises to be one of the most exciting historical adventures of the century. Virtually every government, big and small, has had some part in trying to end the war by non-violent means. And only a small percentage of these efforts has become public knowledge.

Until the secret diplomatic papers are turned over to historians, however, we must settle for the hors d'oeuvres of history — the fragmentary, incomplete, but often highly interesting accounts from working journalists and former officials in their memoirs.

This book falls into the first category and is by far the most thorough journalistic attempt to tell about the various efforts to secure negotiations. The authors, both with the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles Times, have gone all over the world for this book—Warsaw, Saigon, London, Paris, Rome — but apparently had little success in getting any help from Lyndon Johnson, Dean Rusk, or Ho Chi Minh, the people who probably possess the best accumulated knowledge on the subject.

Because the information available to the authors was obviosly fragmentary they had to deal with only what they had material about. This, in no sense, is a complete diplomatic history, but rather fragments of history.

The book begins with the abortive effort—marigold—in late 1966 to get talks started in Warsaw between U.S. and North Vietnam representatives. The idea for the talks originated in Saigon with the Italian ambassador to South Vietnam, and the Polish ambassador played an intermediary role in trying to get Hanoi to authorize someone to talk to U.S. Ambassador John A. Gronouski in Warsaw.

The talks never took place much to the embarrassment of the Poles. They claimed later that North Vietnam would have talked but U.S. bombing of Hanoi forced the cancellation. The authors seem to share the Polish rationale and there is much unhappiness expressed in the book about bureaucratic breakdowns in Washington: How could the Pentagon have bombed Hanoi when the State Department was about to commence talks? Unidentified officials are quoted as saying "Oh, My God!" when picking up the newspaper and reading about the raids.

For the reader, however, the problem is that we really don't know why Hanoi didn't talk. The book lacks any solid insights into the Politburo in North Vietnam. (Of course it is doubtful if anyone knows much about that secret body, even in Moscow).

The authors discuss in some detail U Thant's efforts to get talks started and Harold Wilson's endeavors. The 37-day bombing halt is studied, as well as the preliminaries to the bombing curtailment that preceded the current Paris talks.

The book concludes with the question:

"Can the United States in 1968 achieve a more satisfactory settlement in Vietnam than might have been obtainable a year before, or even earlier?"

The answer given is not yes or no, but that the Johnson administration "missed opportunities over the years to secure, if not peace, at least negotiations, if not negotiations, at least talks; and if not talks, at least a propaganda advantage over the enemy that would have improved the nation's standing in the world community and the President's credibility at home."

Maybe.

There are others, however, who believe that until 1968 North Vietnam was unwilling to go half way to the conference table — making the possibility of talks extremely unlikely until now.